

# Communicating Food Policy Issues

## Media and the Politics of Sustainability



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### **Abstract**

There is increasing concern that pressures on the global food system present a major threat to human and environmental health, but that awareness of ecological challenges is not being translated into social and political action of the degree and type needed to address them. This suggests a need to understand how citizens conceptualise and respond to food-related risks and threats in the contexts of their everyday lives where demands on their attention, time and hip-pockets are significant and immediate. It requires that efforts to change individual consumption behaviours are complemented by an understanding of the social and discursive environments in which food meanings and practices are taken up. This paper draws upon emerging research on environmentally sustainable diets, Australia's recently released *National Food Plan*, and a variety of literature on the politics of sustainability and media representations of food issues to identify questions for future research in this area. We highlight some of the limitations of efforts to change individual consumption behaviours through social marketing campaigns and identify the need to understand the links people make between food and the environment, how these are shaped by situated, local knowledge and experiences, and the role of media in shaping citizen-consumer views and the practices of key food-related interest groups.

**Keywords:** media; communication; food sustainability; food policy; framing

### **Introduction**

Food system sustainability is an issue of growing international concern. Climate change, population growth, changing economic conditions, competition for resources, and diet-related health issues are among the challenges facing the food system (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), 2013). Recent global and national policy documents have cited the vital role of consumer engagement, alongside production efficiency and system transformation, in meeting this challenge (United Nations, 2012; DAFF, 2013; Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council, 2010). At the same time, we learn that awareness of ecological and wider sustainability challenges is not being translated into social and political action of the degree and type that is needed and that pro-sustainability values are not translated into actual consumption behaviours (Barry, 2005; Novacek, 2008; Prothero et al., 2011; Scerri, 2009). In short, the rhetoric of sustainability is often not matched by the reality (Gray, 2010).

This paper draws upon emerging research on environmentally sustainable diets, Australia's recently released *National Food Plan*, and a variety of literature on the politics of sustainability and media representations of food issues. In doing so, it points to the complex interrelations and understandings that exist between policy, expert, media and consumer discourses. The paper suggests areas in which further research is needed given that the responsibility to address food system challenges is increasingly being

shifted onto consumers. We highlight some of the limitations of efforts to change individual consumption behaviours through social marketing campaigns and identify the need to understand the links people make between food and the environment, how these are shaped by situated, local knowledge and experiences, and the role of media in shaping consumer views and the practices of key food-related interest groups.

## **Emerging Research: Behaviours Required for an Environmentally Sustainable Diet**

The question of what drives change in complex food systems is critical to the development of policy goals. One option advocated by some is the development of new dietary guidelines that combine nutrition with environmental considerations to give coherent advice (Lang & Barling, 2012). This section briefly reviews existing Australian guidelines for a healthy diet and emerging guidelines for a healthy and a sustainable diet. It draws from emerging research examining dietary behaviours that support sustainable food production and healthy eating (Pearson, Friel & Lawrence, in press; Friel, Lawrence & Pearson, 2012). That research aims to contribute evidence to assist government, and other stakeholders from industry and not-for-profit sectors, in providing advice to consumers, which may be included in policy documents such as the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) Australian Dietary Guidelines.

Whilst civilisations have thrived on vastly different diets that evolve from unique cultural, economic and agronomic contexts, within the contemporary Australian situation summary advice for a healthy diet is built around five guidelines, namely:

- Guideline 1: Be physically active and choose amounts of nutritious food and drinks to meet individual energy needs that maintain a healthy weight.
- Guideline 2: Drink plenty of water whilst eating a wide variety of foods from the five groups every day:
  - Vegetables, including different types and colours, and legumes/beans;
  - Fruits;
  - Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain and/or high cereal fibre varieties;
  - Lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans; and
  - Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or their alternatives.
- Guideline 3: Limit intake of alcohol and foods containing saturated fat, added salt and sugars.
- Guideline 4: Support breastfeeding.
- Guideline 5: Prepare and store food safely. (NHMRC, 2013)

Recent research has identified additional features that build on existing advice for a healthy diet to create a healthy and environmentally sustainable diet. The 12 additional features have been grouped into three categories around the product, its source and provisioning behaviours:

- Food product:
  - Adjusting consumption of meat to recommended dietary amount.
  - Adjusting consumption of dairy products to recommended dietary amount.
  - Adjusting consumption of junk food to amount for optimal enjoyment.
  - Hydrating from tap water rather than purchasing it in a bottle.
- Source of food product:
  - Minimising consumption of out-of-season products, particularly fresh fruits and vegetables.
  - Minimising consumption of fish from non-sustainable sources.
  - Increasing consumption of food from environmentally enhanced sources, such as certified organic.

- Reducing purchases of foods with packaging which is above that required for product protection.
- Reducing food transport by selecting more local options.
- Favouring less processed foods.
- Behaviours around food provisioning:
  - Reducing food waste, and recycling unavoidable waste.
  - Reducing energy use in food purchases, storage and cooking. (Pearson et al., in press)

Hence the combination of advice for a healthy diet with these additional features creates what could be referred to as a 'Theoretical Healthy and Sustainable Diet'. Ongoing work will specify the changes to behaviour that are required for consumers by comparing this Theoretical Diet with actual dietary behaviour including food intake as measured by the 2012 Australian Bureau of Statistics' Australian Health Survey (Friel et al., 2012). However, to provide policy advice that facilitates enactment of change it is vital to identify factors that inform consumers' dietary behaviour. This encompasses individual consumer's attitudes and knowledge in relation to opportunities for and barriers to change. Factors at play might include affordability and availability, food preference, and level of commitment to environmental sustainability in relation to food. The meanings people attach to food and how they tie their identities to different food related practices are also important. Dietary advice must also be situated in the context of the wider 'food information environment' (Ferreira, 2006) in which a variety of actors and messages circulate, including those that might contest the features of an environmentally sustainable diet outlined above. Furthermore, in light of the disconnect between dietary guidelines and everyday life (Lindsay, 2010), it is important to consider how and for whom guidelines are developed, the uses to which they are put, and the wider policy context in which they sit.

### **The Sustainability Agenda: Some Conceptual Issues**

Despite the accumulation of eco-political knowledge and the sense of urgency surrounding ecological issues, concerns persist about the scale and speed of policy measures (Blühdorn, 2007). There is a fundamental tension between the achievement of sustainability as requiring radical change in the most basic principles of late-modern societies and the general consensus about the non-negotiability of democratic consumer capitalism (Blühdorn & Welsh, 2007; Scerri, 2009). Blühdorn (2007) argues 'simulative politics' are a key strategy by which late-modern societies try to sustain what is known to be unsustainable. Petersen (2007) argues, while there may have been an integration of environmentalist vocabulary into public discourse, this rhetoric "remains detached from actual changes in societal practices towards sustainability" (p. 212). In short, much of the talk about sustainability and environmentalism takes place in a context where established lifestyles and patterns of economic development continue to be encouraged and maintained (Petersen, 2007). Some suggest we now live in a *post-ecologist era* characterised by the *politics of unsustainability* whereby the *management of the inability and unwillingness to become sustainable* has taken centre stage (Blühdorn & Welsh, 2007). Indeed, there is increasing recognition that food system sustainability is a fundamentally political project with cultural, social, and ideological dimensions, and not simply a set of ecological standards easily met by discerning consumers (Johnston, Biro & MacKendrick, 2009).

This brings us to the tenuous position of marketing and its potential to encourage sustainable consumption practices, given its role in driving consumption in pursuit of economic profit rather than environmental gains (Peattie & Peattie, 2009). This is where social marketing – as the marketing of messages directed at changing people's behaviour for socially desirable goals, such as environmental gains, rather than promoting the consumption of certain products – seeks to offer an alternative approach. Also referred to as sustainable, anti-consumption, quality of life or welfare marketing (Varey, 2010), these approaches focus on how marketing can be used to promote sustainability and, ultimately, more sustainable forms of consumption (Burroughs, 2010). However, critical scholars view social marketing campaigns as a form of neoliberal governmentality in as much as their primary goal is individual behaviour change through the

internalisation of regimens of self-discipline (Crawshaw, 2012). In doing so they are seen as obscuring structural determinants. Empirical research also demonstrates that the discourses upon which they draw and present as though ‘common sense’ are often debated and resisted by individuals (Hobson, 2002; see also Crossley, 2002). In sum, there are limitations to what can be achieved through social marketing, as noted by Peattie and Peattie (2009):

Until material expectations become more realistic from a sustainability perspective, social marketing initiatives to create meaningful levels of consumption reduction may struggle to achieve the necessary level of support from consumers, investors and policy makers. (p. 267)

More pointedly, seeking to change individual consumption patterns is likely to have little constructive effect so long as the institutional interests that create and benefit from unsustainable practices remain intact and unchallenged. This resonates with what Cox (2010) and others identify as the need for discursive action to be more closely linked to social and political action. In the area of climate communication Cox links the failure of recent campaigns to a lack of strategic alignment between specific communicative efforts and their consequences within the economic, political and ideological systems in which policies are embedded (see also Brulle & Jenkins, 2006). For an issue such as food sustainability, this includes industrial practices and consumer behaviours, preference, values and the like. Campaigns that fail to appreciate this are unlikely to engage citizens in any sustained manner and, in the context of climate change, have been criticised for undermining the capacity for significant social change.

Scholarship in this area could build on the idea that ecological threats and the formation of ecological rationalities are more closely related to societal framing procedures than to scientific data. This might take the form of viewing (food) sustainability as a communicative problem that needs to be coded in such a way as to link into and irritate existing systems and communicative contexts (Blüdhorn, 1997). It does not mean disregarding facts about the strained productive capacity of the planet, but foregrounds the construction of food system challenges as social problems and the processes by which they become recognised as public issues. The focus becomes the discursive realities constructed by the multiple voices contributing to and implicated in the debate and the interests that shape their frames and actions (Blüdhorn, 1997; Grove-White, 1996; Hajer, 1996; Jamison, 1996). What is their role in the politics of (un)sustainability? Where are they situated along the continuum of environmental to sustainability citizenship, the latter of which encompasses economic, social, political and cultural spheres (see Barry, 2005)?

It has been suggested that some accounts of sustainability, such as those found in business discourse, constitute powerful fictions that need to be challenged (Gray, 2010). Gray describes this as the ‘capture’ of the sustainability concept by powerful groups who use it to “distract attention from any conflicts that it might engender and the planetary context in which it must be understood” (p. 53). It is a process of appeasement directed at consumers, especially those who are increasingly believed to care about where their food comes from and the working conditions of those involved in the food supply chain, which takes the place of a serious accounting for the global dynamics of sustainability. Thus, there is a tension between the goal of engaging and mobilising citizens around the issue of food sustainability and concern that processes of mainstreaming or integrating sustainability thinking into discourses and practices run the risks of sanitising or diluting the issue.

The issue of food sustainability lends itself to further investigation of how different discourses variously seek to appeal to people in their roles as citizens and consumers and with what effect for how people respond. How do citizen-consumers interpret messages around sustainable food and to what extent are their practices informed by them? In what ways do people identify with (or distance themselves from) particular media and social marketing messages directed at encouraging them to be environmental citizens? How do health and environmental considerations figure in people’s food practices?

Australia’s *National Food Plan* identifies the goal of producing food sustainably and the *demonstration* of sustainability, in terms of improving the quality and accessibility of environmental information (DAFF,

2013). It highlights the increasing desire among consumers to have information about the environmental impacts of their food choices. Interestingly, for the purposes of this paper, it also mentions the importance of media and communication in enabling or constraining the community's ongoing acceptance of operations and activities:

Modern communications technology and social media channels are changing how people engage in debate, expanding the flow of information, widening the scope of the conversation, broadening opportunities for participation and increasing expectations about the speed of change. (DAFF, 2013, p. 49)

This statement recognises and attributes much to the role of new media and communication technologies within contemporary food information environments, but the precise ways in which they are generating public debate and mobilising public opinion and action in relation to food issues is an area for empirical investigation. Research could, for example, identify the range and type of apps and alternative consumption websites that enable consumers to learn about the provenance of food products, who uses them, and what social impact they are having. How are food activists and industry groups seeking to capitalise on the affordances of new technologies to advance their views and interests with respect to food sustainability? As a communicative problem, how is food sustainability made meaningful to audiences?

### **Framing Practices and Food Information Environments**

The media industry is firmly implicated in the 'politics of unsustainability' referred to earlier in as much as it reinforces and promotes a culture of mass consumption that is seen by many to be fundamentally incompatible with the principles of sustainability (Blühdorn & Welsh, 2007). But media also create awareness about food issues, including risks, and serve as forums through which interest groups struggle for public attention and legitimacy (Blue, 2010; Lupton, 2004; Miller & Reilly, 1995). The idea of 'mediatisation' seeks to capture the interplay between media and other institutions and spheres of activity (Hjarvard, 2008). It brings an emphasis on how media shape the practices of other social actors and fields of action by becoming increasingly central to how they obtain/maintain legitimacy, recognition and public support. This section identifies findings from previous research in order to illustrate the manifold contribution of news and popular media to public discourse on food issues.

Research in the area of news framing has elaborated how media professionals 'package' information by using framing devices to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). News framing is conceived as a dynamic cultural process that reflects decisions about what is deemed significant or newsworthy, the constraints imposed by newsroom work and routines, and the cultural assumptions news professionals make about their audiences (Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2003; Schudson, 1995; Tuchman, 1978). Gitlin (1980) suggests excluded information is usually what audiences might find ambiguous, unpredictable or culturally unfamiliar. News also tends to be event-focused and stories can disappear quickly from the agenda as the next big issue emerges. This limits its ability to inform and mobilise publics around complex interconnected issues such as environment, health, agriculture and food. Distrust, emotional fatigue, indifference, ambivalence and powerlessness are just some of the responses that could result from the over-simplification of issues or focusing too much on the problem without explaining choices or options for action (Lockie, 2006; Olausson, 2011).

The news media play a major role in disseminating information, setting agendas, and framing issues for public debate and policymakers, and the way an issue is framed has much to do with who is doing the framing and their media-oriented practices. The authors of one study found that the framing power and devices used by scientists to publicise their research on obesity rates in Australia, along with the failure of news media to test their claims and seek out alternative viewpoints, potentially contributed to an environment in which calls for action and policy proposals are likely to be subjected to less scrutiny than warranted (Holland, Blood, Thomas, Lewis, Komesaroff & Castle, 2011). The media practices of official

sources can also undermine public trust in them as sources of reliable information. For example, in 2002 the Swedish National Food Administration was criticised for its role in generating ‘alarmist’ media coverage of the risks of acrylamide in starch-based foods (Ferreira, 2006). A particular concern was the agency’s crafting of its press release to fit the ‘news’ format, including using the headline, ‘Acrylamide in Food Causes Cancer’, which was successful in creating awareness but had no discernible effect in terms of changing consumption behaviours. Nor was it followed by advice to consumers about how to cope with the risk or concrete policy measures to food processors (Ferreira, 2006). In a different example, the British government’s decision to suppress information about the risks to human health of mad cow (BSE) disease was linked to fears of alarmist media coverage and the impact it could have on agricultural production (see Murphy-Lawless, 2004).

In the United Kingdom, mad cow and foot and mouth disease serve as powerful examples of how such crisis situations trigger wider public debate and distrust about food production and supply chain practices, in turn shaping how future food issues are communicated and understood. Freidberg (2004) highlights the strategic work of non-government organisations (NGOs) in capitalising on the fallout created by these disease outbreaks to push supermarkets to respond to their concerns about the ethics of food production. In particular, she looked at the ‘media work’ involved in three NGO campaigns for ethical food supply chains with respect to their overall strategies for gaining voice, legitimacy, and influence. Among the study’s conclusions was that particular NGOs, together with popular media, “participate in the ethical complex that drives British supermarkets’ ongoing efforts to demonstrate socially responsible supply-chain governance” (p. 528). Freidberg notes that the willingness of supermarkets to engage and work with NGOs is shaped by whether or not the NGO has an established and positive profile and media coverage is an important determinant of this. NGOs compete with one another for attention and, as is the case with industry and other groups, many employ people whose job it is to monitor, attract and manage media in accordance with their organisation’s interests. Freidberg also identified a preoccupation with the media among food exporters, importers and retailers. Further research into the kind of media work engaged in by NGOs, supermarkets and other interest groups could contribute valuable insight into the mediatisation of ethical and sustainable consumption (Eskjær, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008; see also Couldry, 2004).

News and current affairs programs in Australia have also been successful in exposing aspects of the food supply chain, capturing the attention of publics and, in turn, effecting policy change. A recent example was the 2011 *Four Corners*’ exposure of the live export of Australian cattle to Indonesia, which led to a suspension of the trade (see Tiplady, Walsh & Phillips, 2013). Widely picked up by other media, this story shone a light on food production practices, food trade and animal rights. It offers an example of the influential role media, in combination with interests groups (in this case Animals Australia and the RSPCA), can play, particularly on issues where people have little direct experience. The news value of this story was clearly high, aided by the availability of graphic imagery, and this perhaps suggests a problem with respect to communicating issues that are not easily conveyed through visuals.

As suggested, experts, industry bodies, consumer groups and activists interpret and seek to use sustainability in a variety of different ways and according to their own interests (Grove-White, 1996), and journalists and other intermediaries have a role in translating these claims. The positions taken by stakeholders on the issue of genetically modified organisms (GMO) is illustrative. Pro-GMO actors argue that it offers the key to sustainable solutions, while anti-GMO actors see it as running counter to sustainability principles (Van Gorp & van der Goot, 2012). The corporatisation of organics is another example where research shows that many of the themes of food democracy, such as the ‘eat local’ appeals, have been taken up and woven into the marketing discourse of the corporate-organic foodscape. While food democracy activists attempt to channel these themes through non-commodified programs, marketers produce similar narratives to sell their products. While the appropriation of food democracy themes in the marketing of corporate organics attests to the powerful social meanings of these themes (Johnston et al., 2009), it also raises questions about how citizen-consumers recognise these claims and where they turn for trusted information about the environmental and social impacts of food choices.

The significance of news and interest groups' framing practices must be understood in relation to the socio-political context from which they emerge and into which they enter. It is here that the idea of food information environments is useful. Ferreira (2006) says food information environments comprise the sum of three discrete yet interrelated fields of inquiry: science, cuisine, and marketing. The knowledge produced within these fields filters through into news and popular media, advertising, and everyday food practices. It is critical to consider how food products are constructed in each of these domains and the impact they have on consumer perspectives of food safety, nutrition and sustainability issues. In the context of food-related risk studies, Ferreira (2006) says:

A focus on the environment of the food product addressed by the risk message rather than on the risk message alone may give some insights on the processes of selection and translation by the media. (p. 856)

Food information environments are saturated by media and, as such, claims about the unsustainability of existing consumption patterns and production methods have to compete for consumers' attention with a variety of other messages that may be more appealing or of more immediate interest. The massive proliferation of television cooking programs, celebrity chefs, and reality-style programs appears to reflect a renewed interest in and problematisation and fetishisation of food, cooking and eating in western capitalist societies. Television programs such as *Kill It, Cook It, Eat It* and *Gourmet Farmer*, for example, have a strong focus on informing people about the food production process from paddock to plate in a manner that may encourage people to think more about food sustainability. Popular programs such as *Masterchef* and *The Biggest Loser* deal with food, cooking and eating in very different ways. They are linked to commercial interests and seek to encourage people to shop at particular supermarkets or purchase certain products, and this shapes how viewers respond to them (Caraher, Lange & Dixon, 2000). Added to this are the numerous social marketing campaigns directed at changing people's dietary behaviours. Prominent examples of government initiatives include: 'Swap it don't stop it' (<http://swapit.gov.au>), spurred by concerns about growing rates of obesity; 'Go for 2&5' (<http://www.gofor2and5.com.au>), encouraging increasing consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables; and 'Love food hate waste' (<http://www.lovefoodhatewaste.nsw.gov.au>), focusing on the environmental and economic cost of unnecessary food waste by citizens. The ways in which these cultural products impact people's knowledge and behaviours needs further empirical investigation. What is the role of popular culture and advertising with respect to ideas of 'environmental citizenship' and 'green consumerism'?

## Conclusion

Food related issues touch so many areas of life, from the wellbeing of individual bodies to the integrity of ecological systems, that claims and counterclaims abound (Blue, 2010). This adds richness and complexity to how food issues are conceptualised in research, represented in the media, and understood among various publics. This paper has offered suggestions about where more research is needed to uncover the role of media, in combination with other social actors, in shaping citizen-consumer views and practices around food sustainability. Conceptually, focusing on narratives that are constructed about food and how they reflect or obscure the social and environmental conditions and impacts of food production, distribution and consumption may produce valuable insights (see Freidberg, 2003). How media discourse on food policy issues has changed over time, the frames and media-oriented practices of interest groups and, importantly, the ways in which food sustainability finds meaning in the lives of individuals living in different socio-cultural contexts, are key areas of inquiry.

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